

THE MUSIC-TEACHER'S SWEETHEART.

I.—THE MUSIC-CLASS.

I WAS slowly pacing the wharf at Mobile, watching the small craft sent homeward by the sinking sun, when I noticed, without looking away from the sea, that a man was walking beside me. Being somewhat scornful and independent—perhaps too proud—I secretly resented the freedom of the man's conduct in presuming to accompany me in my walk without having become acquainted with me. I walked steadily and composedly on, not noticing him, and not even deigning to make any maneuver to be rid of his company. Presently, by way of introduction, he suggested, in a small, timid voice:

"The ships are coming home."

This random remark was evidently addressed to me; but I ignored the speaker, pretending not to hear him. I did hear him, though. That voice, above all others, conveying so timid an appeal, should have sunk into my heart. Failing in this attempt to attract my notice, he grasped me by the sleeve in a manner that conveyed an apology for the liberty he took, and said, in the same timid voice:

"My dear sir, you certainly will fall into the water if you walk too near the edge."

I turned upon him then with a scowl, and with harsh words rising for utterance; but upon seeing his face I checked myself.

Worse than any malady of the flesh; worse than insanity; worse than the rankling of an outraged conscience; worse than bloody writhings under the lash; worse than hunger; worse than the agony that torture brings; worse than death; worse than the damnation hurled in thundering threats from velvet-covered pulpits;—worse than these all, because sadder and more pitiable, stood before me, and appealing more strongly to the heart than all—the wreck of a mind. Imbecility looked placidly out from the calm, patient eyes,

conscious of everything but its own existence; knowing not even the purity and goodness and human holiness that it had; ignorant of the fact that with the mind had gone, also, all selfishness, all avarice, all unseemly ambition, all hatred—all the baser traits that belong to the ripe development of mental vigor, and that crush into the dust those nobler things that make the soul. The shadow cast by mind was lifted, and humanity stood revealed. The woman, with everything gone but her endearing weaknesses and untiring love; the man, stripped of his outward vestment of harshness and unhappiness; the child, with nothing but its artlessness—stood before me in the falling night; while the vessels moored in the dock, and the night-wind came up from the gulf, and shadows stole out upon the water and mingled with others that came up out of the sea.

"I thank you," I said kindly, extending my hand.

He gave me his hand with some hesitation—not, I think, because he feared me, but because of his natural timidity.

"I might have fallen," I added, seeing that he hesitated and was confused.

"Yes," he replied, in his quiet, smooth, musical voice; "and if you had fallen you might have drowned."

I believe I then understood his nature and knew his longings. He was shut out from the great home of humanity. The mad world, rushing by, thrust him aside as useless for its selfish purposes, and left him by the wayside desolate and alone, without a friend to hear his sorrows, without a hand extended in friendship, without a look of encouragement, as he quietly worked out the problem of his life. My heart went out to him that night. I had rather have such a man call me "friend" than be the favorite of a king.

He was shy and cautious, and secretly

and by force of habit mistrusting; but I encouraged him, and soon he spoke to me with some self-confidence.

He was rather a small, slight man, not yet forty years of age; his dress was faultlessly neat, and there was an air of refinement about him, showing itself in the chaste language he employed, and in the shy self-respect he betrayed, that convinced me he had been reared with care. His hands were small and white; and his face, on which he wore a carefully trimmed mustache, was nearly handsome.

We soon became well acquainted as we strode arm-in-arm upon the wharf, and I asked him what his business was.

"I am a music-teacher," he said with a deprecating air, but with absolute honesty.

"Ah!" I exclaimed, unable to conceal my astonishment; for how could such a man teach music?—and who would be his pupils?

"Yes," he said, not noticing my surprise.

"What do you teach?"

"Songs, dances, operatic music, and the like."

"Vocal and instrumental, then?"

"No: simply vocal."

I was at fault as to the proper procedure in fathoming this mystery.

"Have you many pupils?" I asked.

"I have twenty-three now," he readily answered; "I had twenty-four yesterday, but I sold one this morning."

"Sold one?"

"Yes."

"At what price?"

"Fifty dollars."

His answers were so ready, and evidently so honest, that I believed he suffered under an hallucination.

"Is not that rather a low price?" I asked, cautiously feeling my way.

"Why, no!" he exclaimed, with a quick look of surprise. "I don't know any other teacher that can get such a good price. Sometimes I get seventy-five dollars. Surely, you never bought any that could sing well."

I confessed that I had never bought any

at all, and that I thought I would not know what to do with one if I should do so extraordinary a thing as to make such a purchase. It occurred to my mind that this mild-looking and ingenuous creature might in reality be one of those fiends who kidnap children, train them as musicians, and sell them to blind beggars. The suspicion was unworthy of me, but it forced itself upon me.

"Who buy them?" I asked.

"O, people who can afford it."

"Showmen and the like?" I suggested.

"O no! They have no use for them."

"Beggars?"

"No!" and he laughed with quiet glee—the first smile I had seen on his sad face.

"Why, how could beggars afford them?"

"But some beggars are rich," I argued.

"Are they? Then why are they beggars?"

I explained that they sometimes pretended abject poverty; but he could not comprehend such duplicity; nor did he know what I meant when I insinuated that they frequently carried with them, to sing and play for the money of the benevolent, children that had been trained for the purpose. Suddenly he turned upon me with the request, seemingly heretofore overlooked:

"Will you come to my house with me? If you will, I'll show you my pupils."

"Certainly," I responded; and we started. "But do you keep them at your house all night?"

"Yes: I have to keep them locked up, or I would lose them. The whole school would either run away or learn bad habits. I have to be very strict with them, but I try not to be cruel; for I speak kindly to them, and give them everything they want; and I am sure they love me very dearly. O, I like to teach them, although once in a while I have one that isn't as good as he might be." He said this with a very confidential manner, that conveyed an adjuration of the profoundest secrecy. "I have one now—Tom—first-rate fellow, but just a little stubborn. For instance, when I am trying to make him learn a certain song—'Home, Sweet Home'—he will frequently refuse to sing at all. The other day I was trying

to make him sing it, and he would pretend to try, and then he would be quiet a while, and then suddenly he would burst out with some other song he had already learned. Well, of course I have to correct him. I wouldn't seriously ill treat him for all the world; and he has more intelligence and talent than any of the others; so I starve him half a day. That always makes him behave better. What I desire above all things is to have him learn 'Home, Sweet Home,' and sing it correctly. Tom has sense enough to learn it, if he would; but he seems to be determined not to learn that song. You see, it is very difficult for him, because it is slow and tender. He is young, and nothing pleases him but wild, rollicking songs. That's the kind that people generally want to hear, though; but I want him to sing this for my own gratification, for I wouldn't sell Tom for any price. Sometimes he can catch the notes well enough, but he sadly murders the modulation, and always gets the song too fast. That's the main trouble."

And thus he prattled on in his childish way, and all the time I was trying to solve the enigma. He carried me into a district with which I was not familiar. The narrow streets, and quaint houses with tall, tottering walls, told of the old French town, and of desertion and decay. A few bats flew in and out through small windows innocent of glass. Long grass, wet with dew, lined the narrow walk, and set cunning traps for the unwary step.

The moon shone with unusual brightness. Save the howling of a dog not very far away, no sound penetrated the solemn silence of that deserted street.

We stopped before a house much like the others. My friend carefully drew a great iron key from his pocket, as if afraid it would break, and opened an iron door red with rust. It was very dark within; and it was with many stumblings that I made the perilous ascent of a flight of rotten stairs. We entered a large and gloomy room, which was the humble home of my friend. At my request he did not light a lamp, as the moonlight streamed through the windows,

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dimly illuminating the poor appointments. A feeling as if I were in the midnight haunt of spirits bore oppressively upon me, and I drew my chair nearer the window, through which the southern breeze came softly.

I did not see a trace of music-pupils, and I asked my companion:

"Where are your pupils?"

"I keep six in a room, and have them in several rooms. You see, I rent this entire floor."

"No one lives with you but your pupils?"

"No one," he answered sadly. Then two tears trickled down his cheeks. "Perhaps I would not be alone if I had been a better man. Once I had dreams of a happy home, with a bright face to gladden my life—but it was all my own fault. People don't like me," he added in tremulous tones. "They think—they think—" and he hung his head and hid his face from me—"that I am crazy."

"They should not think that," I said.

He looked up at me with a half-reassured expression in his eyes, and pitifully asked:

"Do you think I am?"

I shook my head.

He looked his gratitude, and then leaned back in his old worm-eaten chair, and sighed painfully. He did not speak for a long time. He was far away in that mysterious land of reverie and dreams known but to those who grope in the dark highways of benighted intellect, close upon the outer confines of heaven.

"Are you ever lonely?" I presently asked. He roused himself, and answered:

"Not now—not while you are with me. You are so good to me! Your voice is so kind and tender! Oh, if you could like me only a little, I should be so happy!" and he buried his face in his hands and wept like a child.

I do not know how it was, but certainly my sight was dimmed. I put my arm around him, and told him to trust me and be my friend.

He repressed his sobbing, and then suddenly he straightened himself, raised his hand with a warning gesture, and whispered:

"Listen!"

The glorious song of a mocking-bird broke the stillness of the night—rang through the gloomy corridors like a pæan of wedding-bells; chased out in confusion upon the lonely streets grim ghouls and unseen gnomes that lurked in ghostly corners; poured in through the open windows facing the sea, and lighted the dreary room with the brilliancy of song. It ceased.

"That's Tom," said my friend.

"Your pupil?"

"Yes."

"Then they all are mocking-birds?"

"Yes. Didn't you know that? Why, I thought everybody knew it!"

II.—THE SWEETHEART.

I visited him day after day, and we had long strolls together. It was with great interest that I watched his manner of training the birds and his treatment of them. I do not believe they knew his demented condition; but certainly the attachment they had for him, which was fully reciprocated, was the strongest and most tender that I ever saw between a human being and creatures of a lower order. I account for this partly by the fact of his great kindness toward them, and partly by the other fact that there was less to separate him from them than usually exists; that his unconsciously borne weakness raised them, in his view, to a degree of intelligence reciprocally high; that consequently, occupying more nearly than usual the same plane, there was more companionship between him and them than there would have been had he occupied the natural position of man in dominion over lower animals; and that, as compatible companionship begets love, he and the mocking-birds mutually loved through the mysterious workings of affinity. But there was also much of the father in his manner toward them. He provided them with food, hunting the markets or the fields in summer for choice berries, and buying for them in the winter every delicacy he could find.

Frequently they were very headstrong and unruly; but with untiring patience, and

sometimes with a little severity—such as speaking harshly, or withholding their food for a day—he would bring them into willing submission. He was always kind, but never lenient; always firm, but never tyrannical; always the father, but never the master.

He taught them with a flute. He would play part of a song over and over—hundreds of times—demanding silence while he played, and permitting them to sing nothing else when he finished. With the exception of Tom, on whom he bestowed especial pains, he drilled them in classes of six, these classes being made up with fine discrimination as to the special temperaments and musical powers of the birds. Each class had a separate room, so that one class could not hear the other, with the exception of Tom, who enjoyed considerable freedom. This precaution was necessary, as one class, overhearing the song of another, would instantly seize upon the new melody and tear it to fragments, having not been thoroughly drilled in it. If they too often heard strange notes, these would be wildly and indiscriminately thrown into songs already learned.

My friend was very shrewd, and a close observer. One day he said to me:

"A mocking-bird has no idea of time and system. He learns nothing by method, but everything by practice."

It was eternal watchfulness on the teacher's part that made the birds trained songsters, singing ballads, dances, and operatic songs, instead of the twittering and rollicking *pot-pourri* of the native wilds—a medley of the songs of other birds, themselves outdone in their own performances by the light-hearted minstrel of the woods.

Let a pupil sing at any time a theme that was not his lesson, and a sharp word from the teacher would hush him at once, and a few notes from the flute would start him aright. When one song had been drilled into a class for several weeks and until it was thoroughly learned, another lesson was given. Then came unceasing trouble, as the pupils would sadly mix the two; but patience would conquer it all; and at the

end of two years, when a pupil had sown his wild oats and settled down to a realization of the grave responsibilities of life—when the reckless and exuberant spirit of youth had mellowed into the soberness of manhood, and the enthusiast had merged into the artist—the bird musician could sing four songs, and was worth fifty to seventy-five dollars in the market.

It was not long before I noticed a strange and altogether unaccountable practice of my friend's. He was a miser. This fact, with all the suffering that it entailed in separations from his feathered friends, caused me great wonder, which had its origin in the deep love that he had for his birds, and the great grief that it caused him to part with one. I have known him to pay stealthy nocturnal visits to birds that had been taken many miles away; and once he was shot at for his trouble. Yet he sold them as soon as he could get them ready, and he always had in training as many as he could attend to. His wants were very few. He did his own cooking, washing, and ironing. He was scrupulously neat, but he had no fine clothes. He provided his table with only the cheapest wholesome food, and abstained from luxuries.

The fact that he was miserly contradicted his whole nature, and every other circumstance of his life. There never was a more generous-hearted man; for once, to test him, I pretended great need of five hundred dollars. The next day he placed a thousand dollars in my hand, and was much grieved when I declined to take it, until I told him I had made other arrangements.

And thus the days went by, while our friendship constantly strengthened. The glorious summer had passed, and the vanguard of winter came in the chilling winds of November. One day I found him sick with pneumonia.

"You are very sick," I said; "I must bring a doctor."

"I can't afford it."

"You have money."

"Yes; but I had rather die than spend it. There is enough now for it to do some good ;

but if I squander it on myself it will take so long to make it again!"

But I pleaded with him, telling him that with life prolonged he could greatly increase his hoard; and at last he yielded.

I summoned a physician. Two days afterward he told me that the case was a dangerous one. We did all we could for him. The fever rose and burned him. I watched him day and night, and carefully obeyed his instructions concerning the birds.

At length the physician told me that if there were anything to arrange it should be done without delay. My heart sank at this. Through all his illness the patient sufferer had not once complained, and his helpless condition had drawn me so much nearer to him that I could not give him up.

The time had now come when the secret of his life must be known; when the terrible causes that laid a bright mind in the dust should be discovered; when the object of his hoarding should be found. There was nothing to sustain him in battling with the malady. There was nothing that rendered life dear. There was nothing for which to live, but something to be gained by dying. I hoped and believed that in the solving of the mystery lay the only remedy against death—the only thing that would make him struggle against the disease and fight for life.

"I have not abandoned hope," the doctor said. "You may wait until to-morrow."

I dared not wait. The task before me might be difficult, and I must begin at once. Would it frighten him to know that death was near? Certainly not; and then the knowledge, and what it might develop, might save his life.

I broke it gently to him. He was very thoughtful, but not alarmed. I asked him kindly, "Is there not some one in all the wide world you would like to see?"

The only reply was some tears that trickled down his cheeks, and then a look of intense anxiety came into his face.

"You have been saving your money for some one," I said.

He made no reply.

W. C. MORROW.